

Prospectus

THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT AND THE COLD WAR CONSENSUS

by

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President Lyndon Johnson used the Gulf of Tonkin incident on 4 August 1964 as justification for a retaliatory airstrike and a Congressional endorsement—the Tonkin Gulf Resolution—to use any means necessary to protect the sovereignty of South Vietnam from northern aggression. After the incident and the retaliation, the Johnson administration first used the precedence of these initial retaliatory airstrikes, and later the Tonkin Gulf Resolution itself, as justification to “Americanize” the Vietnam War through a series of escalations that culminated in direct, US ground-force involvement in the war. Throughout this period, advocates of Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam policy in Congress and the media (and perhaps national security experts and military professionals) ignored or actively concealed inconsistencies in the administration’s version of the events of 4 August 1964.

In the immediate aftermath of the Tet Offensive (and perhaps even earlier), opponents of the war began to use the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution as a weapon against Johnson’s Vietnam policy. The incident was vulnerable to attack; there were numerous questions over the incident, including whether (as the administration claimed) it had been unprovoked or whether it had even happened at all. Congressional opponents (and perhaps media figures and antiwar activist) used doubts over the incident to undermine public support for the war. Likewise, these dissenters attacked what they called the misuse of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution; they claimed the resolution had never been intended to permit the administration to prosecute a war in Vietnam. This effort began with the 1968 Fulbright hearings, in which key

administration figures were called to account for inconsistencies in the administration's version of the events of 4 August 1964. From these hearings until the end of the Vietnam War, presidential deceit became the dominant critique of the war.

After the end of America's war in Vietnam and the subsequent fall of South Vietnam, national security experts, military professionals, journalists, and historians began to construct a consensus as to why America had lost the war. The Gulf of Tonkin incident and perceived misuse of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution figured prominently in this postmortem analysis. Through this process, a narrative emerged across multiple professional and scholarly disciplines that President Johnson's duplicity in obtaining and employing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution had produced only fragile, tentative public support for the Vietnam War, support that collapsed once the war failed to reach a rapid conclusion.

The shifting uses of the Gulf of Tonkin incident—as a justification for war, as a weapon against that war policy, and as a tool to understanding the war in its aftermath—is instructive in its own right, shedding light on how America starts, ends, and remembers wars. But it is much more important as a tool to understand the dynamics of the so-called Cold War consensus—a shared understanding between political, national security, and media leaders and the American public that constrained public foreign policy debate during the Cold War. The dominant narrative of the latter half of the twentieth century is that the Vietnam War shattered this Cold War consensus. In this dissertation, I will argue that the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution figured so prominently in the Vietnam policy debate and in the war's aftermath precisely because the Cold War consensus did not collapse. I contend that the Cold War consensus remained so powerful in American public discourse that its basic tenet—fighting wars to prevent the spread of Communism—was unassailable; questioning this ideology was beyond

the pale of acceptable policy discourse. Instead, opponents of the war, as well as those who tried to understand the war in its aftermath, were forced to restrict their arguments to the misuse of the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution or the broader narrative of presidential deceit.

METHODOLOGY

In this dissertation, I will show that both the Johnson administration and, later, opponents of the Vietnam War in the Congress (and perhaps in the media and antiwar movement) relied on the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tonkin Gulf resolution as a proxy argument for or against the Vietnam War policy. I contend that the Johnson administration used the incident and resolution to justify the war because it failed in its earlier attempts to tap into the strong Cold War consensus to justify the war. I will also show that, once begun, the war became intertwined with and inseparable from the Cold War in the eyes of the American people. I also contend that Congressional (and perhaps other) opponents of the war chose to attack the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the resultant resolution because they had tried and failed to assail the war itself; they were defeated by the prevailing sentiment of the American people who still embraced the Cold War consensus and saw the Vietnam War as within this framework of the Cold War. I contend that, once the narrative of presidential duplicity in starting the war took root (after the 1968 Fulbright hearings) and because of the enduring strength of the popular Cold War consensus, the Vietnam War was finally excised from the Cold War framework, criticizing the war itself became acceptable in public discourse, and presidential dishonesty became the dominant historical and popular narrative for the war.

To prove my thesis, I must show the following:

1. Before the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Americanization of the war, the American public did not accept the Vietnam War in the framework of the Cold War (i.e., as worthy of American military intervention).

2. The Johnson administration tried and failed to use Cold War arguments to justify the Americanization of the Vietnam War.

3. After the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the passage of Tonkin Gulf resolution, these events became the Johnson administration's primary justification for the war.

4. After the Americanization of the war, the American public perceived the Vietnam War as part of the Cold War.

5. Congressional (and perhaps media and activist) opponents of the war initially tried to attack the Vietnam War as part of the Cold War (and perhaps attack the Cold War ideology itself).

6. The American public rejected these attacks on the Vietnam War (and attacks on the Cold War framework, if they occurred).

7. Congressional (and perhaps media and activist) opponents of the war changed tactics in 1968, instead attacking the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tonkin Gulf resolution.

8. After 1968, questions about the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tonkin Gulf resolution—coupled with broader accounts of administration dishonesty—became the dominant criticism of the war in Congress, the media, and the antiwar movement.

9. After 1968, attacks from Congressional, media, and activist opponents on the Vietnam War's suitability as a part of the Cold War framework (and perhaps Cold War ideology itself) became increasingly vocal and frequent.

10. The American public was receptive to attacks on the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tonkin Gulf resolution and the Vietnam War's suitability as a part of the Cold War framework and began to reject the Vietnam War on this basis.

11. After 1968 and after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the American public continued to support Cold War ideology (and reject attacks on Cold War ideology, if they occurred).

12. The post-1968 critiques of the war—based on the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Tonkin Gulf resolution, and broader administration dishonesty—became the dominant narrative in popular and scholarly histories of the Vietnam War. Criticisms of Vietnam's suitability to the Cold War paradigm also figured prominently. However, earlier critiques—of the Cold War framework itself—were much less prominent.

The Johnson Administration

Administration actions and arguments for the war will figure prominently in the first part of this dissertation. A key source of information will of course be the Lyndon Banes Johnson Presidential Library at the University of Texas in Austin. I am especially interested in the archive's collection of speeches and radio addresses and telephone conversations. I am also very interested in the contents of the Vietnam File (boxes 58-262) which address presidential decision-making before and after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The library also holds complete transcripts and recordings of press conferences and Congressional briefings that will be very useful in understanding presidential arguments for the Vietnam War.

To understand the internal deliberations of the administration before and after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, I will examine the papers and oral histories of other administration figures—including George Reedy, Jr., Bill Moyers, McGeorge and William Bundy, George Ball, Robert

McNamara, Clark Clifford, and Walt Rostow—held at the Lyndon Banes Johnson Presidential Library.

The Media

Media figures played a huge role in public understanding of the Vietnam War and, in fact, were political actors in the public debate over the war. Print correspondent Stewart Alsop was an early advocate of American intervention in Vietnam. His oral history is maintained at the Lyndon Banes Johnson Presidential Library at the University of Texas in Austin (as is reporter Peter Braestrup's). I may also travel to the Library of Congress to examine the Joseph and Stewart Alsop papers. They contain records and notes from Stewart Alsop's travels to Vietnam as well as documents leaked to the Alsop's by the administration to support the White House' case for war. These documents might be useful in better understanding the administration's arguments.

Archived media sources will be essential in completing this dissertation. I will consult the National Archives Motion Picture, Sound Recordings, and Video Research Room in College Park, Maryland, which maintains a database of ABC radio recordings through 1971, and the Library of Congress Audio Visual Archive, which holds NBC radio recordings. I will also examine the motion picture series at the Lyndon Banes Johnson Presidential Library archives at the University of Texas, which includes over 134 titles from CBS television news as well as a handful of titles from other news sources.